PEERING THROUGH THE TREES, OR, EVERYTHING I'VE EVER LEARNED ABOUT AMERICAN SUMMER CAMP CAME FROM *FRIDAY THE 13TH PARTS 1-4* AND *THE BABY-SITTERS CLUB SUPER SPECIAL #2*

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In the early 1980s, first Mrs. Voorhees and then her damaged, homicidal son hacked and slashed their way along the shores of Crystal Lake. Fifteen years later, in New Zealand, my friends and I – all members of the VHS generation and beneficiaries of the Scholastic book club – spent our fifth form science periods at our private, all girls' high school planning how to make our own half-baked slasher film. It was the sort of scheme that's enormously fun to concoct and unlikely to be enacted, traced out in biro on brown chemistry benches. There was a wooded scout camp on the semi-rural outskirts of the city, spitting distance from one friend's house, which was begging to be terrorised by a sexually ambivalent masked killer. (It was also conveniently close to Christchurch Men's Prison, which could perhaps provide justification for a homicidal escapee.) If that didn't work, another friend's family had a holiday home, a chalet-style log house set amongst native forest, in an alpine village a 90-minute drive away. There were loads of places to get lost or grievously injure oneself while fleeing, plus all the comforts you could ask for in the mid-late 90s (hot water, DVD, PlayStation). Her parents also had a clunky, outsized handicam. A perfect plan.

I don't think we got much further than a list of teen archetypes (the jock, the virgin, the slut, the nerd), some detailed death scenes, and a theme song whose plinky-plonky banjo evoked a certain sense of faux-American backwoods horror. But, as an adult who researches and writes about horror, I've often wondered how it was that a group of fifteen-

year-old New Zealanders – some of whom had never watched a horror film at all – had come to internalise the culturally-specific tropes of the American stalker-slasher genre so completely.

The early *Friday the 13th* films are many things: guilty pleasures; portfolios of creative kill shots; the intersection of base instincts and opportunistic marketing. However, little attention has been paid to the way that the United States' low, pop cultural id comes to contribute to the country's international voice, such that one country's margins are seen in another context as a mainstream representation of American cultural hegemony. This franchise, which at its most cynical level aimed to exploit the desires, fears, and wallets of a young audience, has indelibly contributed to broader perceptions of American adolescence and (sexual) rites of passage. Alongside other cultural exports, this in turn shapes non-American understandings of teen culture, genre, and storytelling, contributing to a circuit of meaning-making in which even the most marginal of cultural artefacts can have an outsized effect.

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Given the franchise's remarkable international dissemination, we must recognise that the first four films, those set at summer camps and holiday homes along the shores of Crystal Lake, relish in the power of repetition in myth-making. *Friday the 13th* (1980) starts in 1958 with a warning against adolescent malfeasance. The action that plays out in the present, twenty-one years later, serves as comeuppance against those who have not remembered nor respected the circumstances surrounding Jason's death. The startling eruption and irruption of Jason (a real boy? a hallucination?) from the lake in the film's final moments further blurs the line between myth and reality. Later characters repeat the story of Mrs Voorhees and her son until the hazy details have both the ring of truth and the weight of history. Spooky hearsay quickly becomes established fact not only in diegetic time, but in the short periods between the films' releases.

Friday the 13th Part 2 (1981) immediately acknowledges this cinematic textuality and its roots in urban legend. It begins with a flashback that is almost comical in its length and detail, in which the film we *only just watched* becomes a shimmering, six-minute highlights reel. The film proper plays out like an uncanny, heightened reappraisal of the first: same shtick, but more sex, more blood. The events of the first film are recounted, by firelight, as if they occurred in the distant past, even though it is set only five years later. "I don't wanna scare anyone, but I'm gonna give it straight to you about Jason," says Paul, the head camp counsellor, as the others toast their marshmallows; "[I]f you listen to the old timers in town they'll tell you he's still out there, some sort of demented creature… some folks claim they've even seen him, right in this area." The story itself is the set up to a prank, but there's pleasure in the dramatic irony that the counsellors don't realise that they are already strapped to the Catherine wheel of genre. Time compresses and warps, our privileged viewing position is acknowledged, and we, the spectators, are schooled in the new rules of the game.

Part 3 (1982) and *The Final Chapter* (1984) likewise rehash endings as beginnings, repudiating closure in order to justify the films' existence, and maybe sneak in extra gore before the credits. It's as if the films eat themselves, like a boorish ouroborous. They quickly establish and naturalise culturally-specific tropes, much as the urban legends that the films draw from are seemingly locally-specific but lacking in origin and authorship, free floating and readily transmissible. Similarly, the films (as cultural artefacts) enter into dialogue with the expectations of the audience. These are in turn shaped and challenged by other pop culture forms, including the contemporaneous explosion of slashers. Everything jostles for position within an increasingly crowded field.[1] Throughout, Jason becomes (paradoxically) increasingly recondite as a character, but more fixed as an atavistic trope and our most consistent point of contact. Given this unlikely continuity, we kinda start to root for him.

I highlight this playful recursivity because it applies as much to globalised cultural export as it does to the dynamic function of genre itself. It's necessary to note that the *Friday the 13th* films aren't just horror films. They are *American* independent films, well-pitched commercial products, which achieved significant success and widespread international distribution. This might seem like a redundant observation, but one of the outcomes of the so-called 'American Century' is that we live in a world where American popular culture, concerns and perspectives are situated discursively as the default mode against which everything else must position itself. They remind us of their importance, incessantly, like an MC rapping about their postcode. The horror genre also figures in global fears about Americanisation and cultural imperialism[2], which frame films (like other forms of popular culture) as a type of infection vector or colonising force.[3] It doesn't really matter that many American 'Golden Age' slashers were savaged by contemporaneous mainstream critics, nor that the films gleefully position themselves at the margins of good taste for an audience up for lurid thrills. They are still the products of a cultural hegemon: commercial artefacts that might enter the world in a highly localised manner, but that circulate through global channels. These might include distribution networks and corporate relationships, journalism and reviews, cultural practices such as spectatorship and fandom, franchising and merchandising, and the dissemination of paratexts like trailers and posters. I know I am not the only person whose nascent cultural literacy was moulded by the abject allure of the American-dominated horror section in our local video store, one of many that popped up, like mushrooms, during VHS boom.

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The everyday outcome of this cultural hegemony on non-Americans is that American places, foods, and cultural practices come to feel as familiar as local ones, even if you don't seek them out or even have access to them. Consider this as a great, hyperreal Frankenstein's monster that looks a like Mickey Mouse, wearing a cowboy hat and Air Jordans, eating Twinkies and Thanksgiving turkey in the middle of Times Square, while grooving to some Bruce Springsteen. This is especially apparent in the early *Friday the 13th* films' very American summer camp setting. Here in Aotearoa New Zealand, organised

sleepaway summer camp is definitely not a big thing. Summer coincides with Christmas, New Year, and six or seven weeks of school holidays, in what amounts to a mass national shutdown. People certainly might go camping or tramping (i.e. hiking); New Zealand's sense of national identity includes a heavy emphasis upon the outdoors, and the country has varied and dramatic geography within a comparatively small space. Rather, many schools have outdoor education programmes that respond to the national curriculum framework. Between intermediate (middle) and high school, I was fortunate to go on camps in a grey-green river valley in subalpine beech forests, a parched high country station marked by limestone outcrops, and a few different sites along the nearby Banks Peninsula, an ex-volcano with two long harbours and multiple bays formed in its ruined cones. Five day programmes were designed to develop water and survival skills in extremely changeable weather, while strengthening character (i.e. driving everyone a bit nuts); think wet and dry caving, 'fun' with ropes at heights, failing at sailing, hiding bags of sweets from your maths teacher, and negotiating icy river crossings with a group of awkward 14-year-olds who are freaking out because you've all suddenly got your periods at once. It seems a bit different to the signature flavour of cheery, sunny opportunities marketed to young Kiwis who want to kick off their gap year by working as camp counsellors in the States.[4]

And yet, via the trickle-down effect of the slurry of American cultural hegemony, I can easily build an idyllic, pop-culture inflected image of summer camp: log cabins, appropriation of Native American iconography, camp spirit, arts and crafts, s'mores, cook outs (a very American term), matching t shirts, archery, canoeing, swimming, talent shows, lanyards (why?), best friends forever, American flags, and poison oak (although I still have no idea what that is). This image draws as much from the first few *Friday the 13th* films as it does from that pre-adolescent cultural titan and A-grade American export, Scholastic's *The Baby-Sitters Club* series – specifically *Super Special #2: Summer Vacation*, in which the entrepreneurial tweens apply their childminding skills in an outdoor setting while experiencing appropriate levels of personal growth. I must have read it half a dozen times;

for a non-American reader, who was taunted by inaccessible deals in the backs of the books, both suburban Connecticut and upstate New York seemed like faraway exotic television land. It's there, too, in books like Carol Ellis's *Camp Fear*, a *Friday the 13th*-influenced title in the wildly popular *Point Horror* range of young adult novels, which were passed around like contraband by girls my age in the early 1990s. Add *Meatballs*, *The Parent Trap* and "Hello Muddah, Hello Faddah" into the mix, and I feel like I'm a verified camp expert.

Throughout, summer camp is a wholesome summertime bildungsroman that gorges itself on its own fountain of nostalgia. It is also inflected with uncertainty: an unfurling, embodied affect that comes at the cusp of puberty, or (later) adulthood. In more adult-oriented media, this signals an emergence into a haze of sexuality and eroticism that might be as dangerous as it is tantalising, in that summer camp is the liminal space in which anything – anything! – might happen. Importantly, this gives form to some of the *Friday the 13th* films' ideological and mythic perspectives. To say that the early *Friday the 13th* films are about sex is a bit like saying that *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) is about space – a statement that is an objective fact, but also a surface level, descriptive indication of much deeper metaphysical and ontological conundrums. These films walk a provocative line between innocence and prurience that reflects a peculiarly American strain of puritanism. Teens played by actors in their twenties, horny hairy-chested manchildren and Playboy girls next door, play at being responsible adults before being slaughtered like lambs. Only in America can wholesome white kids in matching camp uniforms engage in a sincere singalong of an African-American Civil War spiritual, abscond to have pre-marital sex, profess innocence when caught, and then be duly dispatched for the benefit of the appraising, disembodied, viewer.

We're offered a wry mission statement in *The Final Chapter* when young Tommy Jarvis gets an unexpected eyeful, as one of the women next door undresses with the curtains open. Tommy has already caught an illicit glimpse of people skinny-dipping, and now he can't

believe his luck. He squeals, bouncing on his bed, overjoyed at the prospect of getting his first, honest-to-God, not-in-a-dirty-magazine glimpse of a woman's naked body. It's a pointed acknowledgement (and celebration) of the series' most base impulses that asks the viewer to recall their own first encounters with sex, while still offering a male-centred voyeuristic fantasy. A more honest moment comes later, though, once Jason has started stalking through the house, a marauding *Thanatos* to the adolescents' sweaty *Eros*. Self-styled player Ted, a little drunk and a little high, has been watching an old stag reel while the others peel off. Startled by a noise, Ted peers around the room, and the film suddenly runs out, its end flapping mechanically. Ted's look of wounded confusion at the disappearance of the vintage nudity only deepens when Jason stabs him through the projection screen with a decidedly phallic knife. Sexual freedom isn't so free; rather, the moralistic cycle between possibility and punishment is as predictable as genre itself. Repackage it and pass it on, and on, until even someone with zero horror literacy can describe the 'Final Girl'.

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This is, of course, all a bit broad brush. From an international perspective, these films are as instructive about the pop cultural construction of (American) sexuality and experience as John Hughes' own mythic account of adolescence, which is itself inflected with both 1950s nostalgia and 1980s American neoliberal self-determination. You might as well structure your understanding of the British educational system on Hogwarts. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that teen culture (movies, television, magazines, music) has long been a staple American export, although transnational cultural circulation and reception is always contested. This is why it is important to identify the cultural specificity of American media in an act of denaturalisation, especially when the iconography and tropes of generic forms become so broadly transmitted as to be immediately legible, even to people with no interest in or knowledge of horror. It is for good reason that a local dinner theatre company in my hometown markets their 'scare' attraction *Friday Night Frights* with the (unlicensed, no doubt) image of a bloodied hockey mask and a pair of crossed machetes, the now-

universal signifier for horror baddie fun times.[5] Whether or not you know his name, Jason sells.

To an international reader and viewer, these American exports are also a key component of a dynamic culture that is always-already hybridised. This requires, implicitly, a heteroglossic cultural literacy. It is unsurprising that young people around the world might see them as part of the 'stuff' of their everyday lives and use them to their own ends, no matter the degree to which they are then localised or (re)mediated. The same, too, will be true of other viewers who have grown up with their own versions of the myth of Crystal Lake, which they tell and re-tell with the weight of religious litany, before bringing in the American flag for the night.

Notes:

[1] The narratives surrounding the first film's success have likewise taken on the role of myth; see Nowell, 28-44.
[2] See, for example, Gustafsson, 189.
[3] See Crane, 365-382.
[4] See some very wholesome action at https://www.campleaders.com/nz/ and https://www.iep.co.nz/summer-camps/
[5] The event itself is a peculiar exercise in hybridity as participants come by vintage tram into the Ferrymead Heritage Park, a working replica of an Edwardian township, only to be hassled by actors dressed as iconic horror villains and archetypes during a walk through. I hear the event has gone downhill; a recent Facebook comment notes that there were "Hardly any actors and [I] had to ask a gentleman with a chainsaw if it had finished" (https://www.facebook.com/janine.stewart.9066/posts/1525305974305190).

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